DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 081 **RC 011 294**

AUTHOR	Hopkins, Thomas R.; Reedy, Richard L.
TITLE	Schooling and the American Indian High School Student.
INSTITUTION	Bureau of Indian Affairs (Dept. of Interior), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	May 78
NOTE	14p.; Small print may be marginally legible
JOURNAL CIT	BIA Education Research Bulletin; v6 n2 p5-12 May 1978
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Access to Education; *American Indians; Dropout Prevention; Dropouts; *Educational Alternatives; *Elementary Secondary Education; Private Schools; Public Schools; *School Holding Power; *Student Mobility; *Transfers
IDENTIFIERS	*American Indian Education

ABSTRACT

American Indian high school students have a number of alternative schools available to them: they may attend public schools, or schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, churches, or the tribes themselves. At both elementary and secondary levels Indian students avail themselves of the various alternative schools. One survey indicates that 42 percent of Alaska Native high school students moved at least once during the last three high school years. It appears there is little good about this practice. Having alternative schools easily available may reduce the pressure on the losing school to meet the needs of the student. A troubled student who moves has a reduced chance of anyone ever getting to know him well enough to be of assistance. Mobility then serves to increase the probability that the student's problems will never by treated. Although 83 percent of the students who leave one school re-enroll in another, the overall dropout rate between grades eight and twelve is 40 percent. No data are available on the full extent of mobility, the causes of it, and of its relationship to cognitive achievement and remaining in school until graduation. Longitudinal research that follows one cohort group over time is needed. Until this is done, the information on schooling Indian students will remain in a state of quasi-enlightenment, and hunches will continue to play a major role in decision making. (Author/DS)

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ED170081

BIA Education Research Bulletin

IN THIS ISSUE

"Minimum Competencies in BIA Schools"
Linda Sue Briscoe

Schooling and the American Indian High School Student
Thomas R. Hopkins and Richard P. Reedy

"Reactions to Frustrations and Anxiety by Indian and White Adolescents"
James C. Martin

A Reading Curriculum for K-6 Indian Schools
Barbara Ann Shenk

VOLUME 6 MAY 1978 NUMBER 2

RC011294

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THEME: SCHOOLS BELONG TO THE PEOPLE

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CONTENTS

Minimum Competencies in
BIA Schools 1
Linda Sue Briscoe

Schooling and the American Indian
High School Student 5
Thomas R. Hopkins
Richard L. Reedy

Reactions to Frustration and Anxiety
by Indian and White Adolescents 13
James C. Martin

A Reading Curriculum for K-6, Indian School
Approaches, Materials and Rationale..... 20
Barbara Ann Shenk

Authors' Page..... 24

Inside Back Cover
Guidelines for Submissions of Articles
Research Council
Editor

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PUBLISHED PERIODICALLY BY THE
DIVISION OF EVALUATION, RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
FOR TEACHERS AND EDUCATORS WHO ARE DEDICATED
TO IMPROVING INDIAN EDUCATION

SCHOOLING AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

by

*Thomas R. Hopkins and Richard L. Reedy**

Since James Coleman's landmark work, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, education researchers have been doing an extended job of soul searching. The soul searching has been to try to determine in more valid and precise terms, "What do schools do?" "What should they do?" and "How do they do it?" Coleman's findings have been reworked and analyzed in so many different ways, using so many different methods, that it would probably be impossible to catalog the full scope of this great rehashing.[1] One good review comes from Shea who concludes:

> The Coleman Report, originally an attempt to find evidence in support of the thesis that blacks and whites had unequal opportunity in school resources of *inputs*, concluded that there was little such inequality.

Shea further states that the unequal inputs to the school were family resources and that the school outputs, namely verbal achievement, were unequal—and the school does little to change this situation. Perhaps more important is his quote from Mostellar and Moynihan concerning this finding regarding the school. They state:

> To the simple of mind or heart, such findings might be interpreted to mean that "schools don't make any difference." This is absurd. Schools make a very great difference to children. Children don't think up algebra on their own...[2]

In the final conclusion of his article, Shea finds that control of the qualifications for a job has shifted from the work setting to the schools. The age old axiom still holds, the individual with the most schooling gets the best job and ultimately enjoys more economic benefits. It continues to be the case that survival in the American society is augmented by getting as much schooling as possible. How does this apply to American Indian high school students and the schools they attend?

It is a fact that American Indians have alternative schools available to them. There are several school systems which enroll American Indian high school students. These include the public schools, schools operated by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), schools operated

*The authors wish to state that the comments and conclusions in this article are in no manner intended to be official statements of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The contents (and their) implications are the personal responsibility of the authors.

by churches and schools operated by Indian Tribes. There may also be alternatives in high school education within these various school systems. For instance, there are several public schools which operate alternative schools at the high school level and there are different programs available with the BIA and church systems.

While there are no existing data which describe the various high school alternatives available to American Indian students, it is reasonable to assume that because there are options available, it has some impact on the behavior of the school staff. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss this probable impact, even though there is great temptation to do so. On the other hand, it is the purpose of this article to present some factual information regarding the education of American Indian high school students and then discuss some of the implications in relationship to the axiom that *Indian students need as much schooling as they can get.*

There is a mobility factor between schools at the elementary and secondary level which is some indication of the extent to which Indian students avail themselves of the various alternative schools. In one survey it was found that 42% of Alaskan Native high school students moved between schools at least once during the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. In a recent evaluation it was found that Indian students attending two BIA residential schools came to the BIA schools from the public schools and most of the students who left the BIA schools returned directly to the public schools.[3] Table 1 provides data on the previous school experience of Indian students attending BIA residential schools.

Table 1
PREVIOUS SCHOOL EXPERIENCE OF INDIAN STUDENTS ATTENDING BIA RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS, SCHOOL YEAR 1975-76

Previous School Experience	% To BIA School "A"	% To BIA School "B"	Average Percentage
K - 8 Public Schools	78.2	81.9	80.0
K - 8 BIA Schools	3.9	4.7	4.3
K - 8 Combination BIA & Public Schools	17.9	13.4	15.7
Last Attended Public School	86.0 (N=206)	83.0 (N=172)	84.5 (N=378)

Table 2

PREVIOUS PUBLIC SCHOOL EXPERIENCE, BY GRADE, OF INDIAN STUDENTS ATTENDING BIA RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS, SCHOOLS "A" AND "B" COMBINED, SCHOOL YEAR 1975-76

Previous School Experience	9th Grade %	10th Grade %	11th Grade %	12th Grade %	Average %
K - 8 Public Schools	73.3	81.3	84.5	81.7	80.0
Last Attended Public School	82.2	80.2	88.7	87.0	84.5
	(Total N=378)				

Table 1 and 2 clearly indicate that BIA residential schools enroll a mobile student body with the largest proportion of them coming from public schools. There has never been any research to determine if mobility between schools is a positive or negative factor regarding its effect on the Indian student remaining in school. It is a fact that it means that schools are losing students. On the other hand, Martin researched student characteristics and behavior in a third BIA residential school.[4] He found that it is probable the most (estimated 83% reenrolled and 17% did not reenroll, dropped out, of all schools) of the students who leave the residential school reenroll in a public, another BIA school, or a special school of some type.

What is presented above is merely the data showing that there is student mobility between schools that enroll American Indian high school students. No data are available on the full extent of mobility, the cause of it, or its relationship to cognitive achievement and remaining in school until graduation. The data raises more questions than it answers.

The dropout rate of Indian students is yet another source of data that provides some indication of the extent to which Indian students complete high school. There are data available which indicate the profile from kindergarten through grade twelve. Fuchs and Havinghurst provide a benchmark regarding Indian high school dropouts.[5] They reported on two studies which included grades eight through twelve from two regions in the western United States. The graduation rate was 57 percent and the dropout rate as high as 61 percent.

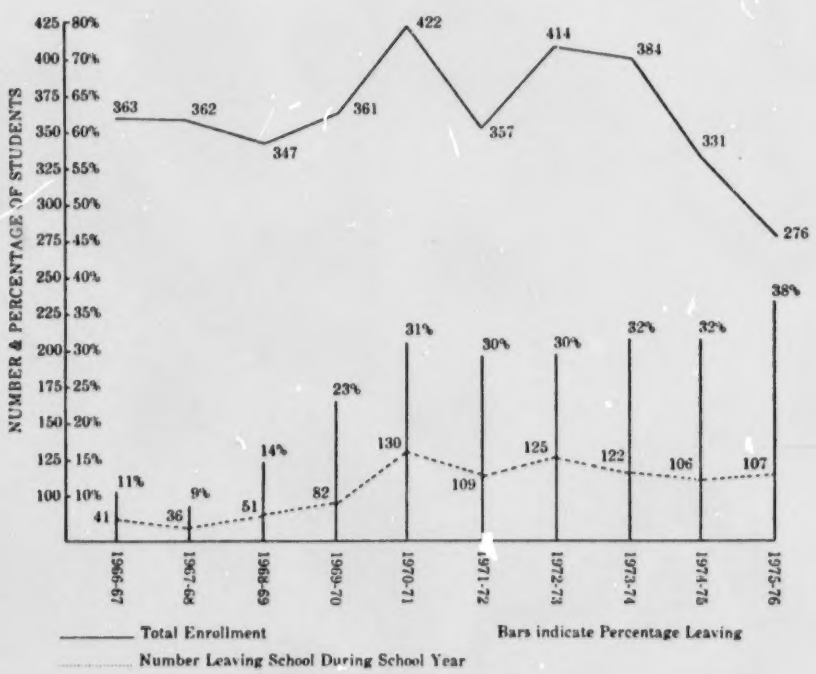
In a recent look at the dropout situation, Oklahoma State University conducted a needs assessment of Oklahoma Indians and reported that:

...In studying the State Department of Education Student Profile Base, one notes a trend in that the enrollment of Indian students peaks in the middle and upper middle school years in absolute numbers and in percentage of total population. Then it begins to decline quite drastically at the secondary grade level until at the 12th grade level the Indian student body population is some 8.5 percent of the total whereas at the 6th grade level it is 11.6 percent of the total school enrollment.[6]

It should be noted that caution was advised when interpreting the data as the figures were not the result of a longitudinal study following a single cohort group. They also noted a mobility factor between schools that was based on a sample of 353 who dropped out. They reported that 266 of the students requested a transcript be sent to another school. The dropout data reported above are general and from the public schools. What follows in Figure 1 is data reflecting dropouts from one BIA residential school covering a ten year period.[7]

Figure 1

ATTENDANCE RECORD, BIA RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL "C"
SCHOOL YEARS 1966 - 1976



8

It is unfortunate that there are no summarizing data available providing the student characteristics during this ten year period. However, one may offer some knowledgeable comments. For instance, the school has traditionally enrolled students who were stronger academically than other Indian students. In Coombs 1958 achievement test study, this school was ranked highest of those included in the project.[8] There has been a change in this situation and the attendance record for the school has also changed.

The BIA has been evaluating its education program for decades. Generally speaking, one can find about any statistic desired if they look long enough and find the individuals who conducted the research. It is noteworthy that within the past five years the BIA has started an ordering of its reports and those interested in research and evaluation will find this a rich source.[9]

There are perhaps no comprehensive data presenting figures on the dropouts of American Indian high school students. However, those available provide enough information to conclude that about half of the eighth grade students will graduate from high school. Regardless of the school system be it public, BIA, tribal or church, Indian students drop out before completing high school in numbers greater than their non-Indian counterparts. In fact, Fuchs and Havinghurst 57 percent of Indian students graduate from high school as compared to 77 percent of the general population. There are no more recent figures than these, which were based on 1967 data.[10]

It is instructive to review the available information which provides some answers concerning the question, "Why did you enroll in a BIA residential school?" The BIA enrolls students for educational and social reasons and have developed some six criteria to be used for this purpose.[11] The summary of the criteria includes enrollment because of no school available close to home, severe educational problems in your other (public, BIA, tribal, church, etc.) school, or social (family) reasons. There have been two recent projects in which the BIA asked students why they were enrolled in the school. The two main reasons appear to be because of the difficulty of success in the former school and because of racial tensions. Martin summarizes it rather well:

> ...Apparently, these ninth-grade students felt that they did not have a very good chance of graduating from their former schools. Therefore, these students came...because they felt that they had a good chance to graduate. Twenty-seven percent of the tenth-grade students indicated that they came...because of a negative attitude towards their former school. Apparently, these individuals did not like the environment of the school they attended previously. The eleventh- and twelfth-grade students indicated that the primary reason they came to...was because of racial

attitudes in their former schools. Many of these students stated that their former teachers simply did not like Indians.[12]

It appears that for this school, which is typical of most BIA residential schools, the students enrolled for educational purposes.

There are other data which further explain why some of the students may have been having trouble at their previous school, which complement the reasons stated above. In a three-year longitudinal study, Mary Conyers reported on ninth grade students from unconventional homes. Her study was conducted in Marion, Ohio and was to determine if children from "unconventional homes" behaved differently when compared to those from "conventional homes." A conventional home was defined as one where the student lived with both natural parents and an unconventional home included all other situations. She found that students from unconventional homes had a higher average absence rate; made a lower average grade-point record; and had a greater percentage of truancy, suspensions, expulsions, and dropouts.[13]

Table 3 provides the data on Indian students enrolled in three BIA residential schools.

Table 3

FAMILY SITUATION OF INDIAN STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THREE BIA RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS, SCHOOL YEAR 1975-76

Family Situation	School "A"	School "B"	School "C"	Average Percentage
Living with Both Parents	46	47	39	44
Living with One Parent	44	36	47	42
Living with Other Than Parent	10	17	14	14
From Unconventional	55	53	61	56
Both Parents Living	71	75	61	69
	(N=206)	(N=172)	(N=171)	(N=549)

From the above information, it is rather clear that public schools and Indian families and youth view BIA residential schools as alternatives to the public schools, and vice versa. Without some longitudinal look at the mobility factor of students moving between schools, it is difficult to assign it a qualitative factor. However, on the surface there would appear little that is good about it. It is possible that having an alternative school easily available reduces the pressure on the losing school to meet the needs of the student. It is easier to move the student to another school. It is perhaps important to point out that the BIA pays transportation costs on incoming and leaving students which makes easy mobility to and from there. It is logical to expect that a troubled student who moves between schools has a reduced chance of anyone ever getting to know them well enough to be of assistance. If this is true, mobility then serves to increase the probability that true student problems will never be diagnosed or treated.

It is a temporary point of good feeling that only an estimated 17 percent of the students who left one school did not reenroll in any school. This good feeling is short lived when compared to the overall dropout rate of over forty percent between grades eight and twelve. To survive in the modern society, be it on an Indian reservation or in a city, the more education the better the chances of success.

The very large data source on schooling Indians is almost all one-time research or evaluation research projects. There are virtually no longitudinal research data that follow one cohort group over time. Until this is done, the information on schooling Indian students will remain in a state of quasi-enlightenment, and the hunches will continue to play a major role in decision making. Nonetheless, there is one clear indication that schools (public, BIA, church, tribal) could all put their collective shoulders to the wheel and try to keep more Indian students in school until they have completed high school.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1]See James S. Coleman, "The Evaluation of Equality of Educational Opportunity." In F. Mostellar and D.P. Moynihan (Eds.) *On Equality of Educational Opportunity.* (New York: Random House, 1972); also by Coleman see "Schools Do Make A Difference," *Today's Education,* Vol. 64 (November 1975), pp. 27-29; Christopher Jencks, et al. *Inequality; A Reassessment of the Effects of Family and Schooling in America.* (New York: Basic Books, 1972); the Mostellar and Moynihan work op.cit., the entire book; and for recent and pertinent discussion of education and status attainment see Brent Mack Shea, "Schooling and Its Antecedents; Substantive and Methodological Issues in the Status Attainment Process," *Review of Educational Research,* Vol. 46 (Fall, 1976), No. 4, pp. 464-52€.

[2]Ibid. p. 471.

[3]Most of the data presented in the Tables of this article come from evaluation research conducted at BIA residential schools. Most notably that of Dr. Richard Reedy. Random samples of students were used in collecting the data during the school year 1975-76. It is only coincidental that the three BIA residential schools are in Oklahoma as geographic location of off-reservation residential schools will not change the enrollment pattern significantly.

[4]James C. Martin, "Student Characteristics," as contained in *Riverside Indian High School Evaluation, April 26-30, 1976*, U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Education Resources Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103. Research and Evaluation Report, Series No. 19.01, June 11, 1976, pp. 53-83.

[5]Estelle Fuchs and Robert J. Havinghurst, *To Live On This Earth, American Indian Education* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 134.

[6]Oklahoma State University, College of Education, "Oklahoma Indian Education Needs Assessment," available from the University or from the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Education Resources Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Research and Evaluation Report, Series No. 43-A, March 1976, pp. 25-26 of Vol. 1.

[7]U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Education Resources Center, *Riverside Indian High School Evaluation, April 26-30, 1976*. U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Education Resources Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Research and Evaluation Report, Series No. 19.01, June 11, 1976, p. 103.

[8]L. Madison Coombs, *The Indian Child Goes To School: A Study of Interracial Differences*. (Lawrence, Kansas: Haskell Institute Print Shop, U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1958).

[9]Darva R. Gomez, "Bibliography: A Resource On The Education of American Indians." U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Education Resources Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Research and Evaluation Report, Series No. 51, October, 1976, p. 152. This report contains a complete annotated listing of the Research and Evaluation Report Series as well as BIA Curriculum Bulletins. It also has a bibliography of extant bibliographies on Indian Education.

[10]Op. cit., Fuchs and Havinghurst, p. 133.

[11]U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Field Manual*, Chapter 62. Section 2.5.2 contains the complete listing of criteria for admission to boarding school.

[12]Op. cit., Martin, pp. 58-59. Also, see U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, "The Chilocco Survey," Albuquerque, New Mexico: The Indian Education Resources Center, Research and Evaluation Report, Series No. 1, April 1972, pp. 46-47.

[13]Mary G. Conyers, "Comparing School Success of Students from Conventional and Broken Homes," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 58 (April 1977), No. 8, p. 647.

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